

# Naxalites in Andhra Pradesh

## Have We Heard the Last of the Peace Talks?

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*The government of Andhra Pradesh says it continues to be open to talks with the Naxalites and that it is the latter who have broken off negotiations. What the government does not say is that the Naxalites broke off talks only after it became clear that the government had no intention of stopping the killing of their cadre. To this extent the Naxalites' decision to leave the table cannot be faulted and the principal responsibility for restarting the process would lie with the government. But the revolutionaries have an equal responsibility, namely, to ensure that the unreal tone and the drama of the first round is eschewed and the two sides conduct themselves with the degree of realism one supposes they are capable of.*

It began as a tenacious essay in political realism, entered a phase of sheer drama unbelievable in its unreality, and ended in the bitter rattle of gun-fire.

The reference is to the 'talks' between Y S Rajasekhara Reddy's government in Andhra Pradesh and the *Naxalites*. To be fair to the devil — Rajasekhara Reddy never really believed in the talks and never joined the effort — nor the theatre that was enacted in Hyderabad for about a week. That is about the only good thing one can say about his conduct in the matter: he was consistent in his indifference to the process. He is by nature incapable of tolerating any situation in which he has to share the stage with others, and as a matter of political tradition irremediably deficient in the capacity to thrash out differences in a dialogue. He has always preferred more conclusive alternatives.

His home minister was, on the government's side, the author of much of the effort and much of the drama too. Jana Reddy embodies a certain earthiness that is the most charming quality of a backward peasantry. He is no peasant, and he has seen too much politics to be anybody's fool, but he has chosen to don the guise of a guileless peasant from just the kind of place he hails from: the barren lands of Nalgonda. He probably has his reason. His constituency, the only one he can ever win from, is overrun by the

*Krishnapatti dalam* of the *Maoists*.<sup>1</sup> He knows them, their strength, their weaknesses and their staying power. He knows that whatever else may vanquish them, bluster will not. Chandrababu Naidu tried it, and nearly got killed.

But if Rajasekhara Reddy (let us call him *YSR* hereafter) did not join the effort after becoming chief minister, he was complicit with it in its origins in the preelection campaign. Having been out of power for about nine years, Congressmen were expected in any case to promise many things. But what added a certain seriousness to their promises this time round was that most of them were thrown up in the course of the *padayatra* *YSR* undertook before the polls. He walked around the state, meeting people in the streets and hamlets, listening to their grievances and making promises. In Telangana, he heard many complaints about police lawlessness. It is characteristic of the man that even in that most expansive pre-election mood the one thing he took care not to promise was relief from police harassment in case his party came to power. A former radical student turned Congressman who suggested such a promise in the course of *YSR*'s meeting with the people in a Karimnagar village was told in so many words to *mind his business*.

But what *YSR* did promise was that his government would initiate talks with the *Naxalites* to 'solve the long-standing problem'. Since there is no particular 'problem' that the *Naxalites* are agitating about, he was probably referring to the *Naxalites* themselves as the problem of long standing. Or probably he was not very clear what he was saying. When even more intelligent persons than *YSR* have shown themselves capable of woolly thinking in the matter, one may not expect perfect clarity from a chief minister-probable on a pre-election *padayatra*.

Getting elected was a very pleasant shock for Congressmen. It is not given to human beings to be dishonest with their innermost selves, and so they must have known that nothing they had ever done had entitled them to this. It was what Chandrababu had done and not done that had given them the bonus. A certain humility is natural in such circumstances and so to begin with, steps were taken on various fronts to implement some of the promises. The talks with the *Naxalites* was the most high-profile of them. The ban in force from 1992 against the *CPI(M-L)* (*Peoples War*) as the party was called until September 2004) was lifted, and cessation of police operations against the *Naxalites* was announced in June 2004. The principal *Naxalite* parties, especially the *Peoples War*, reciprocated by ceasing violence against instruments and partisans of the establishment. For a full six months there was practically no killing in police-*Naxalite*

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<sup>1</sup> It is, in parenthesis, nice at last to be able to call the *Maoists* by their proper name. One remembers that there was some theological objection of Chinese origin to the use of the expression *Maoism*; it was said that one should only say *Mao Zedong Thought*. The objection seems to have demised on its own.

war, which is a record for the last decade and a half at least. The people living in the main areas of conflict had a taste of what they had long forgotten: life reasonably free of fear.

A more detailed *code of conduct* for the period of the talks needed to be agreed about before the dialogue could start. Would the police continue their search for underground cadre, and if so by what kind of means? Would they take lawful measures against armed cadre, such as, for instance, arresting them and seizing their weapons, or would the *Naxalites* have the run of the state? On their part, would the *Naxalites* indulge in violent forms of protest such as the burning of buses and blowing up of government buildings, and would they use force as an instrument of struggle, for instance, in land occupation? Or would they confine themselves to lawful means of agitation during the period of the talks? It would obviously be difficult to get the dialogue going without some agreement on these matters.

## Need for Agenda

An agenda for the talks too needed to be agreed on, if possible. The *Peoples War* and the *CPI(M-L) (Jana Shakthi)* announced a team of representatives to talk to the government about the *code of conduct* (which came to be called the *ceasefire agreement*, though many in government claimed to be uncomfortable with the notion of a *ceasefire*, which in their understanding could apply only to two sovereign armies and not between a legitimate force and an illegitimate rebel group). The *Peoples War* was the party that was mainly targeted for the talks for the obvious reason that it is far and away the strongest of the *Naxalite* groups. The *CPI(M-L) (Jana Shakthi)* got tagged along apparently because they were working together with the *Peoples War* on many issues. The other armed Communist revolutionary groups — there are at least five more which can claim varying degrees of armed efficacy and popular support — were not sure whether they were invited, though some of them expressed willingness to join the talks if invited. At least two, the *CPI(M-L) (New Democracy)* and *CPI(M-L) (Unity Initiative)*, whose activity tends to be predominantly peaceful, showed no interest since they — probably rightly — saw the talks as a matter between the state and the more violently inclined *Naxalite* groups.

Interestingly, while sympathisers of the *Naxalite* movement outside Andhra Pradesh have been heard to express doubts about the desirability of the talks, practically no one in the radical Left camp in the state saw the talks in themselves as undesirable. Left to themselves, the normal reaction of the average radical intellectual or activist in the state would have been to ridicule the notion of the talks, and indeed

one prominent writer who is generally left to herself did ridicule the process, but the rest sensed that there was a strong current of public opinion cutting across class and region favouring some kind of dialogue between the revolutionaries and the state, and sensibly bowed to it.

It was realised by the two sides that talks require mediation, and so a committee of mediators was agreed upon. In this as in much of the first round of the talks the *Naxalites* practically had their way: the mediators were essentially their choice. In the heady months of June-October 2004 there was an air of the return of the prodigal child in all official response to the *Naxalites*. The only thing missing was the fatted calf. This strange pampering, which the uncommonly benign air the home minister perfectly sported, was merely one moment of the unreality of those days. The mediators and the representatives of the *Naxalites* discussed the matter of the *code of conduct* with the government and a draft of the terms of *ceasefire* took shape by the end of July. The *ceasefire agreement* had eight clauses in it. All of them amounted to only one thing: that the two sides would, for the duration of the talks, refrain from the acts of violence that had permeated revolution and counter-revolution during the last decade. *Clause 1* committed the two sides to non-use of firearms and any and every means of destruction of life. *Clauses 2, 3 and 6* set out the various acts of violence the *Peoples War* has habitually been indulging in, in the course of its fight against the State, and committed that party to abjure the lot for the duration of the talks. *Clauses 4, 5 and 8* similarly listed the repressive acts the police have been habitually committing in the course of their counter-insurgency operations and committed them to abjuring the lot too.

## ***Clause 7***

That leaves out *Clause 7*, which has become historic in a manner of speaking. The issue this clause addressed was whether the *Naxalites* would go around sporting weapons in public view during the period of talks. From the beginning it was clear to all (or so we thought) what unlike the previous dispensation of Chandrababu Naidu, this government would not insist, as a pre-condition to the talks, that the *Naxalites* put down their weapons, that is to say give up armed struggle altogether. The issue for the *code of conduct* was only this: during the period of talks, when the *Naxalites* were free to move around spreading their political message of revolution, and organising people on issues, would they keep their firearms in some hideout, or go around with the guns slinging from their shoulders? The government insisted that they do not move around with weapons. *Clause 7* as proposed read: “During the period of talks the *Peoples War*

as well as other political parties will be free to undertake propagation of their politics without carrying weapons, in a manner that will preserve the atmosphere of peace". The wording was somewhat elliptic but the intent was clear.

## Hazy Controversy

There has been some hazy controversy regarding the incorporation of and assent to this clause, with trading of charges of bad faith on both sides. The fact perhaps is that it was initially not seen by the revolutionaries as involving any major compromise, but they had second thoughts later. In fact, their first response was the right one, but soon rhetoric took over and there could be no going back thereafter. It is obvious that while a government working under a rule of law regime can in public interest very well open talks with armed groups that reject its law without making it a precondition that they give up armed struggle, it cannot assure them that they can freely move around with weapons and the police will look the other way. It is no answer to this to say that a lot of ruling party men have unlicensed weapons and the police *do* look the other way when they take them out. They do, but the point is that the State cannot and does not on paper commit itself to such licence. Perhaps, if the revolutionaries — or rather, their intellectual sympathisers, who can never have enough of blood and gore — had not taken off at a tangent and messed up the matter with uncalled for rhetoric, *Clause 7* could have been approved as proposed by the government, with an unwritten understanding that in areas where the revolutionaries faced danger from *renegades* or other criminal *counter-insurgents*, they could carry unostentatious weapons of defence, and the police would not interfere.

But any such possibility was foreclosed by radical ideologues of various kinds who quickly got into the act. It was said that the people had a right to carry weapons so long as the State in the form of its police and armed forces did, and any view to the contrary was an ideological surrender to the hegemony of law as an instrument of the State. More earthily, it was said that the oppressed people could no more be asked to abjure weapons than cattle could be asked to give up their horns, or tigers their claws (if claws are what tigers have). Along a different ideological trajectory, it was said that when the gods of brahminical Hinduism were all armed to the teeth, the *dalit-bahujan* masses had every right to arm themselves. Radical theories of political violence had a field day, as they would, since Andhra Pradesh is unfortunately full of pen-pushers whose capacity to withstand the reality of a violent conflict is untested but are fascinated by violence in ink.

Any one hearing the discussion would have thought that the very justification of

armed struggle was in question, and that the government was going back to Chandrababu Naidu's position: that the government will talk to the revolutionaries only if they give up armed struggle. By and by YSR would start saying that, but that was not the issue when disagreement initially cropped up concerning *Clause 7* of the *ceasefire agreement*. Indeed the way that innocuous term of the *ceasefire agreement* was made to look like total surrender of weapons for good and all not only physically, but ideologically as well, has resulted in an obfuscation of the issue that has enabled YSR now to talk of total disarming as a pre-condition for talks and yet give the impression that he is insisting only on having his way with *Clause 7*.

At that time, however, the strong public mood in favour of talks saved the situation. It was suggested by well-wishers of the talks, and accepted by both sides, that the disagreement over *Clause 7* would not be allowed to become an obstacle to the talks. The rest of the *ceasefire agreement* would be finalised and talks initiated, with the controversial clause itself being an item on the agenda of the talks. This, of course, put the revolutionaries in a happy position, for until the time there was some agreement on *Clause 7*, they would go around the countryside with weapons, notwithstanding the ceasefire and the dialogue. That the government knowingly countenanced this is of a piece with the *prodigal child syndrome* referred to above. Or perhaps it was the *long rope syndrome*: it is a little difficult to be certain. For soon the press started publishing news — with telling photographs — of armed squads of the *Peoples War* and *Janashakthi* going around villages, holding meetings, occupying lands, issuing warnings and threats to persons accused of harassing or cheating the people or informing the police about the movements of the revolutionaries, ordering externment of some of them from villages, and so on. While this state of affairs caused understandable disquiet in more than one quarter, the police started expressing disquiet about collection of large amounts of money by the revolutionaries 'taking advantage of the freedom given to them'. There is no evidence that even the worst kind of repression had ever diminished the capacity of the revolutionaries to collect such money as they wanted, and at will at that, and the police know this better than any one. That nevertheless they chose to make a big issue of it is probably because they thought they could use it to disturb the popular mood which had turned very friendly towards the revolutionaries. The most attractive thing about revolution is its deep moral tone, and extortion ill becomes it. But there could be another reason: the police in general — and this has nothing to do with the presence or absence of militancy in the area — tolerate extortion the least among all offences; in fact, it enrages them, because they dislike competition. There are no greater organised extortionists than the police, and they do not like anybody cutting into their business.

But popular mood remained friendly, in fact hugely so, and the talks did start. Nobody had any notion what the agenda could be. Many among the public seem to

have thought that the ultimate agenda was the establishment of peace, which can only mean that armed struggle would be given up by the revolutionaries. In tune with this, the talks were frequently described as 'peace talks'. This expectation, which had no basis in any fact, is probably one reason for the enthusiastic reception the talks got from quarters normally quite unfriendly towards any suggestion of a civilised response to the *Naxalites*. Equally surprising is the belief entertained by many otherwise intelligent persons, including some known as competent social analysts, that the government and the revolutionaries would sit across the table and discuss how best to solve the problems of poverty, untouchability, dowry, drought and so on. They should have known that no government sanctified as lawfully elected will accord that degree of respect to an armed group that is a law unto itself, unless the group is either ready to lay down arms if some policy changes are agreed upon, or has reached a degree of strength that makes normal governance impossible. That the *Naxalites* are in no mood to disarm themselves is a well known fact. And it can be nobody's case that they have the kind of strength that makes normal governance impossible in Andhra Pradesh. That they are capable of causing substantial degree of inconvenience to the administration in its routine functioning in the areas of their strength and influence is true. But by no stretch of imagination can it be said that administration has been crippled to a degree that it makes it impossible for the government of the state to function without letting the revolutionaries into the privilege of policy-making, even as they are free in the interregnum between one round of the talks and the next, and permanently thereafter, to carry on armed revolution. This should have been obvious but was apparently thought irrelevant by many quite intelligent persons. The amount of wool that flew around Hyderabad in those heady weeks could have clothed a sizeable Arctic expedition.

## ***Give and Take***

In the realm of practical politics, dialogue can only be on the basis of *give and take*, unless one side has made life truly impossible for the other. One area where *give and take* was possible was in the matter of the forms of violence and counter-violence that the two sides have developed over the years. The police could agree to stop torturing the kith and kin of a militant to reveal his/her whereabouts, or to put pressure upon the family to make the militant surrender. They could agree to see provision of food or shelter to militants as a matter of political sympathy or social empathy and not a crime. They could agree therefore not to harass people who do so. They could agree not to see the encouragement of the *Naxalites* behind every protest movement

in the areas of their activity, nor to construe such encouragement, if true — as in itself criminal — so long as the grievance is just. They could agree not to obstruct any social or economic benefit obtained by the people with the help or assistance of *Naxalite* activity. In plain terms, to agree not to punish political and social activism in the name of *preventing violence*. This would be a difficult decision to take, but it would have to be taken. It would be objected to on the ground that the seemingly just activism creates a popular base for revolutionary violence, and therefore, the police are entitled to take preventive steps. The apprehension is not without factual basis, but the conclusion inferred is of the same genus as George Bush's theory of the *right of violent preemption*, and no more acceptable. The State must agree not to suppress political aspirations and their peaceful expression in the name of the revolution that lurks behind it, even if we all know that it does. The police should also agree not to kill a person taken into custody, nor hunt down militants and shoot them while eating, sleeping or bathing in a mountain stream as if they are wild game. And not to corrupt militants and create covert operatives inside the revolutionary ranks.

The *Naxalites* on their part could agree not to harm any and every leader of the ruling party, however small or inconsequential, in retaliation to the State's repressive policies. That any and every policeman would not be killed in retaliation to 'encounters'. That the routine political-administrative activity of the establishment would not be forcibly prevented. That elections and election campaigns would be allowed unhindered and the people's freedom to choose to be followers of the Congress, *Telugu Desam Party (TDP)* or *BJP* would not be curtailed. It would be objected to on the ground that as we all know — these parties tell lies and cheat the people — and allowing people to freely follow them would tantamount to allowing the people in their innocence to offer themselves to the cheating. This objection too is not without basis, but nevertheless the revolutionaries must agree not to obstruct the freedom — for truth can be realised only in freedom — though they will, of course, be free to expose the lies and the cheating. The revolutionaries should also agree to be transparent in the allegations they make about persons being police informers, anti-people elements, etc., and fair in their modes of proof, before setting out to punish them. And mindful of the person's social-economic background in deciding the punishment to be given. Indeed, this is perhaps the single most important demand that the people at large would place upon them.



## Distribution of Fallow Land

The amount of violence the two sides have subjected to each other is such that the mutuality implied by such an agreement would be attractive to both. And the people living in the affected areas would be immeasurably happy with it. It could, therefore, be a fruitful agenda for the talks. Some other issues could also be added to it, without transgressing the limits of plain realism. There are some thousands of acres of land lying fallow, mostly in the districts of Warangal, Karimnagar and Adilabad, which were occupied forcibly by the revolutionaries. They intended that the poor should cultivate it but the police would not allow that. With the original landholder scared of the *Naxalites* and the poor scared of the police, the land remains fallow. There could be some agreement beneficial to the poor about the disposal of the land. Not all the original landholders were landlords. Some were merely political enemies of the *Naxalites* or their cadre, and otherwise ordinary farmers. In any case even in those instances where the original landholder was a landlord, it is doubtful that the land implanted with red flags would be legally acquirable surplus land. Yet, most of the landowners have long since expressed willingness to give up the land if they are allowed to retain enough for their needs, or paid some compensation. There was one instance in Nalgonda district where a large extent of semi-cultivable land overlain with intractable litigation was distributed to the deserving among the claimants at the instance the *Peoples War* and the then home minister. The remaining litigants were successfully persuaded not to take the matter to court: such persuasion is essential since property in land is constitutionally protected from acquisition other than in accordance with the law. Some such arrangement could probably be worked out in the matter of all the fallow land. This too would be of advantage to both because there is much public resentment at the sight of arable land of substantial extent lying fallow.

There is another important matter that both sides could fruitfully come to an agreement on. This is the mutual obstruction of political freedom. Whether legally banned or not, the *Naxalite* parties and their mass organisations face tremendous obstruction from the police. They are not permitted to hold meetings, distribute pamphlets, stage cultural programmes, etc. For offences of violence committed by the underground, the activists of the mass organisations suffer terrible police retaliation. They have not infrequently been killed as surrogates for the underground. In turn, they — especially the *CPI (Maoist)* as the *Peoples War* is now called — have made life quite miserable for the local cadre and leaders of the *TDP* and Congress (indeed all the parliamentary parties) in the areas of their influence. Election time can be pretty bad, but even normal times are not altogether safe for them. The elected representatives in the local bodies are especially vulnerable. They can be killed, maimed, their property

set on fire, the lands planted with red flags, etc, for no greater reason than that they represent the repressive regime at Hyderabad. The *Maoists*, at any rate, have never made a secret of the logic of retaliation: when these parties, in power or in opposition, deny us out political freedom, why should we respect theirs? It is precisely because of their logic that a fruitful agreement that will permit both sides to exercise their political freedom — from participation in polls to publication of pamphlets — would be of value to both. We have already seen the likely objection — especially from the police — that political freedom for the revolutionary point of view will tend to increase revolutionary violence. If revolutionary violence *is* found attractive by significant numbers of the people, and *will* grow at the first opportunity, then that says something about the existing state of affairs, and whatever any one may think about such a state of affairs, shutting it out forcibly from society's sight is no response.

This far the dialogue could reasonably have gone. Since an extended ceasefire with armed rebels is unlikely to be acceptable to any government in the absence of the disarming of the rebels on the agenda of the talks, the proper thing would have been to fix a brief agenda as outlined above, get down to the nuts and bolts of it, and conclude it as fast as possible. Indeed, if the dialogue had been understood as a brief and pointed matter, the 'controversial *Clause 7*' could have been simply ignored.

## Resemblance to Theatre

But that is not what happened. The closer the situation came to the actual beginning of talks, the more unreal it became. The government never spelt out any agenda, and the revolutionaries, for their part, seem to have thought of it as some sort of a public debate between ruling class politics and revolutionary politics. Indeed, a large number of their followers too appear to have thought so, and were quite happy about it, for if it was to be a debate, it was a foregone conclusion which side would win. There was, for instance, a proposal that the talks should take place by turns at Hyderabad, and three towns in the three regions of Andhra, Telangana and Rayalaseema. The resemblance to theatre is unmistakable. The resemblance survived the prologue and extended to the first Act too. When the time came for the revolutionary delegation to emerge from the underground for the talks, the delegation of five (at least two of whom are known mostly to live in Hyderabad) went from their normal places of activity to the Nallamalai forests, and then emerged in the full glare of television cameras. They could well have left their weapons somewhere and come down to Hyderabad, if they were not already there. Instead they came out of the forests weapons in hand, followed by their comrades to whom they then handed over their weapons. Turning their

backs on the jungle they walked weaponless into the 'mainstream' as their comrades disappeared into the forests, arms and all, camera bulbs flashing furiously.

At Hyderabad, the government put them up at one of its guest houses, arranged police security, and let them interact freely with the public. The media and public attention they received was stupendous. Any unsuspecting stranger walking into Hyderabad in those days could well have thought that they were leaders of a victorious rebel army, come to receive the sceptre and the crown at the defeated capital. The chief minister vanished from the TV screen, and it was the revolutionaries all the way. Delegation upon delegation from different walks of life, political persuasions and ideological inclinations called upon them. Problems of various sections of society were taken to them and they were asked to raise them with the government in the course of the talks. Even prominent *Ambedkarites* who had on more than one occasion accused the revolutionaries of not comprehending caste and not fighting for its annihilation for the reason that their leadership at the top is upper caste, attended the durbar of the revolutionary delegation, whose main spokesman Akkiraju Haragopal also known as Ramakrishna was a brahmin by birth, to suggest an agenda for the talks that would take in the components of social revolution.

## Disquieting Phenomenon

Forgetting the ideologues, in the minds of the literally hundreds of ordinary people and activists who thronged the Manjira Guest House, there was this assumption, perhaps, that the government had called the revolutionaries to Hyderabad to discuss intractable social issues and people's problems with them, and so it made sense to add their problems to the agenda. It did not occur to any one to ask themselves why the government would want the advice of the revolutionaries, for it is nobody's case that the government does not solve people's problems because it is not aware of them, nor that it has no in-house experts in its Secretariat who can advise it as well. Nor did any one ask themselves why all problems of society should be discussed with the *Maoists*, whose programmatic concern and certainly their comprehension had always been confined to only a few. Perhaps the less innocent assumption was that the government would sense the threat of violence behind the issues raised for discussion by the revolutionaries, and resolve them in the manner suggested by them. Indeed, thus undercurrent of faith in the efficacy of the gun over persuasion or democratic pressure was the most disquieting thing about the otherwise quite charming adulation the revolutionaries received in those few days. Most of those who visited them — delegations of the physically disabled, *adivasis*, hutment dwellers, etc — certainly knew

much more about the issues they had been fighting than the revolutionaries did, and they knew that the government had never deigned to send any delegation other than the police to answer their agitation. In normal circumstances, any suggestion that the government discusses their issues with some other party or organisation would have given rise to understandable resentment at the usurpation of their agenda, but now they themselves voluntarily invited the usurpation. It is not that overnight they had acquired faith in *Maoism*. They were merely expressing the cynical faith that lurks under the democratic skin, that the gun is a more effective political weapon than any devised by democracy.

The revolutionaries rose to the dramatic occasion and promised to talk of everything with the government - land, caste, gender, the World Bank, globalisation, minority rights, etc. To what effect, no one knew. And no one asked, for it was a grand show that no one wanted to spoil. And to give them their due the revolutionaries handled their role with poise and dignity. They avoided the usual radical habit of construing all dialogue as an exercise in putting the interlocutor in his/her place. They of course made it a point to tell people that the solution to all problems lay in their leadership. They meant their political leadership but those who had come to them had already accepted that at a more cynical level.

And on this note the talks started. Some one should have taken things in hand at this stage, made the two sides see sense, and pared down the agenda to the politically feasible. And saw to it that the talks would be a quiet face-to-face affair with no more than two or three on either side, give or take a mediator. That is how all serious dialogue between governments and rebels takes place anywhere in the world. But not in Hyderabad. In retrospect one wonders whether both the radicals and the government were not laughing up their sleeves. On the government's side, to declare an agenda would be to give legitimacy to the notion that there was something the government should discuss with the revolutionaries. To just sit across the table and listen to them hector the establishment without committing itself to anything in particular would belong to the genre of humouring the prodigals, and that the government had no objection to doing. The revolutionaries, for their part, even as they were talking to the government, were in fact addressing the public behind it. For about a decade if not more, they were known to the public outside their areas of activity through news of death — death at their hands or their death. Intelligent persons would often pose the question whether there was nothing more to revolution than killing and getting killed. Now the revolutionaries had a good chance to tell the public that they cared for a wide range of issues of justice. Intentionally or otherwise the revolutionaries utilised the first round of talks to address the public and answer the questions often flung at them. In this they succeeded. They also held a series of well attended public

meetings at various corners of the State, spreading the more usual kind of fire and brimstone message and giving heart to their followers who had grown tired over the years of talking of nothing but police repression.

The only concrete decision that came out of the first round of talks that were held from October 15 to 18, 2004 was that a commission of sorts would be constituted to go into the question of distributing land to the landless. The *Peoples War* which had in the meanwhile become the *CPI (Maoist)* after merging with the MCC<sup>2</sup> of Bihar, insisted that the commission should not consist only of government officials but should also include persons with a history of involvement in agitation of land to the poor. The government agreed, but nothing was put on paper, and soon enough the government forgot about it. It was said that the second round of talks would take place by and by but neither a date nor any more concrete agenda than in the first round was agreed upon.

At that time, it was generally expected that there would be a second round, though any one with any political intelligence must have realised that the government could not go on playing the benign host for ever. The ceasefire was effectively used by the *Maoists* and all the revolutionaries to reenter areas that they had practically vacated for quite a few years. With 'Clause 7' undecided, they were going about with weapons, planting red flags in lands, issuing orders to all and sundry, holding public meetings disseminating the idea of armed struggle. And they had from the beginning made it clear that there would be no surrender of arms and abandonment of armed struggle at the end of the talks. Any indefinite continuation of this state of affairs would evidently be unacceptable to the government. It would, quite likely, insist on more purposeful talks in the second round, namely, some bargain that would make life easier for its rural representatives and administrators while conceding something by way of freedom and relaxation of repression in return. This is what was generally expected.

But then YSR spoke out. He had maintained a strange silence all through, as had his *Director General of Police (DGP)*, except for an angry outburst or two. The government had throughout been represented by the home minister and a *Director General (Intelligence)*. Now YSR started speaking as if he had been asleep all these days and had suddenly woken up. Where is the question of talking about people's problems with the *Naxalites*, he asked. He would talk to them about the modalities of their surrender, if they wished. And of course there would be no toleration of armed men and women moving around. The police would have to act. The *DGP*, taking the cue, expressed the point of view of perhaps the majority of the policemen. Namely, any talks other than for the final surrender of the revolutionaries would

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<sup>2</sup>Maoist Communist Centre of India

only strengthen revolution. If governance had consisted of nothing but policing, this is of course a perfectly sensible view. And indeed it was the view that prevailed with Chandrababu Naidu's government. But the whole point in seeking a different approach from the government was that revolution being a socio-political process, looking at it exclusively from the point of its containment made no sense even to the rulers, let alone the ruled. If there is an armed revolution going on and if it has proved its staying power, it makes little sense even for the purpose of administration to think exclusively in terms of its containment and extermination. A time comes when in the interests of the people, those goals would have to be postponed and governance learns at least in the short run to live with the revolution on terms least injurious to the people involved in the matter. This would be all the more so when the nature of the revolution is such that the people involved in the whole process are the weakest, the poorest and the most vulnerable in society.

But of course there was little possibility of YSR seeing things this way. The only hope for the talks lay in his continued noninvolvement in the process. And so the moment he opened his mouth about it, all possibility of a second round came to an end. At about the same time the then *DGP*, an officer who at least had some field experience in Telangana in an earlier stage of his career, retired and was replaced by an officer who is a stranger to Naxalism as a social process, and fancies himself a tough cop to boot. There was a fortuitous circumstance that, it was hoped, would ensure a less disastrous choice for the post. Namely, that this officer's wife is one of the principal accused in a major criminal prosecution for forgery and fabrication of documents in aid of trafficking in little children in the name of giving abandoned children in adoption to well-heeled foreigners. It was hoped that his appointment would for that reason be seen as improper. But it was not, and not many thought it should have been.

## **Tough Talk**

The tough cop started talking tough and the police started killing. The ceasefire, that is to say the mutual agreement not to kill, had stood quite firm for fully six months by the end of 2004. There were two or three incidents, in Mahbubnagar, Cuddapah and Karimnagar districts, where the *Maoist* cadre violated the agreement but those were clearly local aberrations and not wilful reneging on the agreement on that party's part. The police for their part had desisted from killing, though they continued to do the rest of the nasty things that have become part of policing. But on December 16, when the ceasefire was due to be extended, the state cabinet met but said nothing. It neither extended the ceasefire nor did it declare that there would

be no further extension. Some ministers pretended that they were not aware of any *ceasefire agreement*, and some said that no statement was needed to extend it since it was an informal agreement. Hypocritical noises were however made about continuing the talks with the *Naxalites*, without getting down to anything specific, and without in plain terms extending the cessation of killing. Indeed, the chief minister, ever since he broke his silence in the matter, has consistently talked in a manner calculated to knock down the very basis of the talks by saying that the *Naxalites* would have to give up arms as a precondition. He has never made it clear whether he is only emphasising *Clause 7* or going back to Chandrababu Naidu's stand. While this ambiguity was made possible by the revolutionaries themselves when they talked of *Clause 7* as if it was a pre-condition of abandonment of armed struggle altogether, he is in all likelihood reverting to Chandrababu Naidu's point of view, and would have done so even if radical rhetoric had not created the needless confusion. Only, his reneging on the very basis of the talks would then have been clear to the public.

## Aggressive Police

Once the signal was given from above, the police became quite aggressive. They have started going quite deep into the forests to hunt and kill the armed cadre of the *Naxalites*, in particular the *CPI (Maoist)* cadre. For many years now they have been regularly getting a lot of information about the movements of the armed squads, a fact that reflects the increasing organisational brittleness of the *Naxalites* from about the mid-1990s, and so if they decide to hunt and kill, it is a matter of time before they start hitting the target. When the first incident or two happened, there was possibility of giving the benefit of doubt to the government, namely, that the police had taken things in hand without the consent of the government. But YSR did not leave any doubt in any one's mind. He publicly defended the killings, saying that so long as the *Naxalites* were armed, there would be "encounters", and there was no need of any enquiry because the police — he somehow knew — had acted out of lawful necessity. Once it became clear that the action of the police had the sanction of the government, the *Naxalites* declared that they were withdrawing from the talks, and they too have started killing. About 60 lives were lost in the first two months of this year, and things are therefore definitely back to normal.

On the possibility of resuming the talks, YSR and his cabinet colleagues have been indulging in the most reprehensible double-talk, which appears to have been taken at face value outside this state. The government continues to be open to talks, they say, and it is the *Naxalites* who have broken off. What they do not add is that the

*Naxalites* broke off only after it became clear that the government had no intention of stopping the killing of their cadre. And after YSR reneged on the basic point which the government had accepted at the very beginning of the whole process, namely, that *Naxalites* giving up armed struggle would not be a pre-condition for the talks. To this extent their decision to leave the dialogue table cannot be faulted and the principal responsibility for restarting the process would lie with the government. But an equal responsibility lies on the revolutionaries too, namely, to ensure that the unreal tone and the drama of the first round is eschewed, and the two sides conduct themselves with the degree of realism one supposes they are capable of.